

Hinduism


An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Barbara Stedman", is positioned above a horizontal line.

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*To Jui: Who held things together when I could not.*

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## Abstract

Since Hinduism is so complex, it is impossible to discuss every aspect of this religion in one paper. Instead of giving an overview of Hinduism, I have decided to focus on several parts of Hinduism: religious holidays; Gods, Goddesses, and their meaning; prayer, forgiveness, and life after death; spiritual exercise; and Hinduism in practice. I addressed these subjects through research and through interviews in order to get a diverse perspective on Hinduism.

I could not write about Hinduism without including a section on its holidays, since religious holidays are such an important part of Indian culture. I chose the topic Gods, Goddesses, and their meaning, because I wanted to know the role that God or Gods play in Hinduism. This naturally led to the topic of prayer and Hindus' relationship with their God or Gods. Some Hindus believe in an after-life, and I wanted to know how a Hindu might attain a blissful life after death. I also addressed the topic of forgiveness for sinful behavior, because, in my own religion, Christianity, one must acquire forgiveness before he or she achieves a blissful life after death. Finally, I discussed spiritual exercise and Hinduism in practice to see how Hindus practice their religion day to day.

From research, I achieved a better understanding of Hinduism. Through interviewing three Hindus, I discovered that not everyone agrees with every aspect of their religion. Also, I found that Christianity and Hinduism are not so drastically different as I originally thought.

Since the beginning of my college career, I have always been interested in other cultures. Classes and seminars on other cultures attracted me, and people from other cultures especially caught my attention. As I became friends with people from other countries, I discovered how little I knew and understood about people and places outside of the United States. I wanted to expand my knowledge of Indian culture specifically, because my roommate is Indian. When deciding on what part of Indian culture I wanted to concentrate my focus, I decided that religion would be an ideal topic. Religion is an important part of Indian culture, and many of India's traditions and holidays come from Hinduism, which is India's major religion.

Although there are many sources on the study of Hinduism, I wanted a more personal, subjective look at Hinduism. As with all religions, each person interprets his or her religion in his or her own way. I wanted to obtain a diverse perspective on Hinduism, and I planned on achieving this by interviewing three Hindus. My first interviewee is Jui Shankar, age 26 years. She is from the city of Poona (close to Bombay) in the state of Maharashtra, which is the western part of India. She lived in India for 26 years and moved to the United States 4 months ago. Also, I interviewed Ashis Dutta, age 26 years, who is from the eastern part of India and lives in the city of Calcutta, West Bengal. He moved to the United States a year and a half ago. Prior to living in the United States, he lived in India for 25 years. My final interviewee is Kamal Lohani, who is from Nepal, north of India (see Figure I for all locations). He is 36 years old. Kamal moved to the United States when he was 25 years old, roughly ten years ago. Alongside these interviews, which depict several Hindus' opinions, I show the framework of Hinduism through research. Through research, I hoped to acquire a better understanding of

Hinduism, and, through interviewing, I hoped to gain a unique perspective as seen through the eyes of Hindus.

Hinduism is a complex religion. It is difficult to understand every part of Hinduism, even after a lifetime of study. For this reason, I am concentrating on only certain parts of Hinduism: religious holidays; Gods, Goddesses, and their meaning; prayer, forgiveness, and life after death; spiritual exercise; and Hinduism in practice. I compare and contrast these parts of Hinduism with Christianity, my own religion.

### **Religious Holidays**

As with Christianity, Hinduism has many religious holidays. Most agree that holidays are a time not only for celebrating their religious significance, but also for family and friends to gather. Ashis described the holidays as a time for family to congregate: "Holidays are big. Not because they're associated with a particular religious meaning, but because that's the time when you actually come together. Growing up in a very small family, my parents and me only, made the holidays a time to intermingle with lots of people. So, that was good." Kamal agreed: "It is a time for family union, prayer, and practice of age-old traditions."

The first major holiday, Pongal, is sometimes also called Makara Sankranti or Lohri. This three-day celebration falls on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January. Different parts of India celebrate this holiday in distinct ways, although the harvest of crops and a feast on this day is common (Patil 35-37). Jui described this holiday as the celebration of the harvest season: "You're going to harvest your crops to get ready for new ones. You're supposed to give sesame seed and jaggery (unrefined sugar) together so it becomes like Rice

Crispies, but with sesame seeds. What we say in Maharashtra, it's like a couplet. You eat this, and you speak good things only. So that's the first festival we celebrate at home."

The next major holiday is Holi, which celebrates the end of winter in March (Indian Holidays). Phag and Shimga are other names for Holi. This holiday is also described as the most colorful festival in India, because people decorate themselves with colored water and powder. During Holi, people make sacrifices to the God of fire, Hutashani, by gathering for a community bonfire. This bonfire signifies the burning death of Holika, who is an evil woman in a Puranic legend (Patil 41-43). Jui also told me the story behind the festival, Holi. She said, "It's actually celebrated because it's really popular with kids. You just have a lot of different colors, powdered colors, and you put colors on everybody. It's huge piles of red color, and you're supposed to put it on everybody's face." When asked about the religious significance of this holiday, she replied, "Holi is done because an evil woman called Holika was killed on that day. She was evil to one of the nice men in the mythological stories. So we celebrate it because of that."

Dussehra, also known as Durga Puja, honors the victory of good over evil. Dussehra is one of the most popular festivals, and each state of India celebrates this holiday in a unique way (Indian Holidays). In the north of India, Dussehra is a celebration of the return of Rama, a character from an epic story. In this epic story Rama defeats an evil demon, Ramayana (Patil 75). Jui has her own description of Dussehra. She explains,

Dussehra is the celebration of the conquering of good over evil. On this day, you're actually supposed to go and meet all your elders to pay respect to them. I think that's all you do. We give a leaf shaped like [a heart].

You give it to people, because that's the tree under which the God, Rama, hid his weapons before he went to fight evil. That's what you give to everybody. That's what's for prosperity and good luck.

The last major holiday, which falls in November, is Diwali. "Of all the festivals celebrated in India, Diwali is by far the most glamorous and important" (Patil 77). It is not surprising then that Jui described the Diwali as comparable to Christmas in the United States. Although the religious significance of the Diwali varies from state to state, in the north of India, it is the day of the commemoration of Rama's return from his fight against evil mentioned earlier in the Dussehra festival. In the south of India, the Diwali is a celebration for Krishna's conquering of the demon of hell, Narakasura. This celebration, which is known best for its lighted candles and lamps, lasts a few days. Dhanatrayodashi or Dhanteras is the name of the first day of the Diwali. The three days of the Diwali are Dhanatrayodashi (also called Dhanteras), Chaturdashi (also called Chhoti Diwali), and Bhaidooj, respectively. The second day of the Diwali is the day when the people of India light the candles and lamps in their homes. The entire festival is considered an auspicious time. Thus many people embark on new adventures such as business deals, marriages, or special projects (Patil 77-80). Jui explained the religious significance of Diwali to be the returning of Rama from his battle. She went on to say that her family worships Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth. Since Diwali is the biggest celebration in her family, there is a traditional bath that represents the cleansing of the dirt of the past year.



Jui and her family also consider Diwali to be an auspicious day. Another tradition she looks forward to on this holiday is the elaborate breakfast on the morning of the Diwali. At this elaborate breakfast Jui's mother fixes treats for her family. She goes on to describe some other Diwali customs:

In a lot of houses you actually have small prayer ceremonies called pujas. In the evening you light up your entire house, because you're welcoming the Lord back from his journey. Basically he comes back from conquering evil. So he conquered evil on Dussehra, and it takes him twenty days to come back to his hometown. So twenty days after Dussehra is Diwali. And that's the day you celebrate, because you're showing him the way back home. So that's why we display all the lights. That's the day that people have a lot of firecrackers at home. It's like the Fourth of July.

I had the opportunity to attend a Diwali celebration. Jui and I dressed in our saris, which is traditional dress, and ate Indian food and sweets at the Diwali party. At the end of the night there was dancing. Also, we celebrated the Diwali at home by lighting candles and placing them in the windows to symbolize showing Rama the way back home.

Baisakhi is another holiday, which celebrates the "Hindu Solar New Year Day." This also commemorates the founding of a new form of Sikhism by Guru Gobind Singh (Indian Holidays). (A guru is a scholarly teacher; Sikhism is a branch of Hinduism [Renou, 15-16]). Baisakhi, which is celebrated in April, is a time of dance (Patil 48).

Janmashtami, another religious holiday, is Krishna's birthday celebration. During Janmashtami, Hindus sing and pray (Indian Holidays).

In most of these Hindu religious holidays, people celebrate the birth of Gods, return of Gods from war, and the victory Gods obtain over evil forces. The common thread is the worship of the Hindu Gods. Appropriately, a description of these Gods and their meaning follows the discussion of religious holidays.

### **God, Goddesses, and Their Meaning**

The God of Hinduism is similar to the God of Christianity in the sense that there is one God but this God can take many forms. Correspondingly, there is a Hindu Trinity: Brahma who controls the processes of creation, Vishnu who preserves, and Siva who destroys (Nikhilananda 25). The Vedas, which are the main scriptures of Hinduism, preach that a personal God is not the center of Hinduism, but the worship of God and his many forms is accepted (Nikhilananda 21). Let us first describe the Trimurti (Three-faces) of Hindu Gods.

Brahma, the creator, has four heads and hands (see Figure II). In three of his hands, he holds the Vedas, a water pot, and a rosary. He sits upon a swan, which symbolizes his judgment between good and evil (Brahma). Vishnu, the preserver, also has four hands (see Figure III). In the first hand, he holds a conch shell with which he can radiate the divine sound "Om." In the second hand, he holds a discus, which represents the "wheel of time." The lotus in his third hand is "an example of glorious existence." And in the fourth hand is a mace, which is a weapon with which God punishes those who do not follow the disciplines of Hinduism (Vishnu). Finally, Shiva,

the destroyer, has the Lord's attributes (see Figure IV). Shiva is also known as the "giver God." He sits upon a bull, which represents happiness and strength (Shiva). These are the three Gods that make up the Trinity. They are incomplete without one another (Nikhilananda 25).

The next group of deities is the Vedic Gods, which originated in the Vedas. Indra is the "Lord of the Sky." He is a peaceful, heavenly ruler who controls storms, lightning, and all celestial beings. The next Vedic God is Vayu, "Born of the Wind." Among his powers is the ability to transfer seeds and pollen, to nurture plants and birds, and to rejuvenate nature. Varuna, "Lord of the Waves," is "master of the oceans and rivers." He holds a pot of water in his hand to represent fluidity and movement and destroys evil spirits in the ocean and rivers. Varuna makes the waves in the ocean by riding a chariot drawn by horses. Agni, "God of Fire and Flame," takes sacrifices up to the other Gods. Anything that touches his flame becomes pure. Since fire is present in all homes, Agni witnesses all human activity. The last main Vedic God is Surya who is "God of the Sun." Being the "God of the Sun," Surya provides energy, power, and radiance to his people. He rides a chariot drawn by seven horses, which represent the seven days of the week. Although there are other Vedic Gods, these are the main Gods worshipped in Hinduism (Patil 114-115).

Besides the Trinity and the Vedic Gods, there are many other deities and divinities. For example, Ganesh, who is known as the "Auspicious One," has four hands, an elephant's head, and a large stomach (Ganesh) (see Figure V). Since he brings good luck, Ganesh is worshipped first at celebrations. Ganesh coexists with a mouse; a mouse and elephant living in harmony represents balance in life. He also represents balance in

the sense that he is overweight, but still excels in art and keener skills (Patil 120). In his four hands, he holds a rope with which to bring people to the truth, an axe with which to cut the rope, a sweet dessert ball to reward his people, and his fourth hand is free to help those in need (Ganesh). Rama, another God known as the “Embodiment of Perfection,” is perfect in the sense that he shows goodwill and love to all people and things (Patil 122) (see Figure VI). He holds a bow and arrow, ready to kill anything evil (Rama). Another commonly worshipped God is Krishna, who is known as “Teacher of the World.” He earned this title by delivering the Bhagavad Gita, another Hindu scripture, to the Hindu people (see Figure VII). Parvati, who is known as the “Daughter of the Himalayas,” has two forms: Durga and Kali (Patil 124, 126). Both forms have eight hands. Married women especially like Parvati, because she provides a happy married life for those who worship her. Lakshmi, another female deity, is married to Vishnu (see Figure VIII). She has four hands, which represent her four virtues: prosperity, purity, chastity, and generosity (Lakshmi). Saraswati, wife of Lord Brahma, dresses in white to represent her purity (see Figure IX). She has four hands, which represent mind, intellect, alertness, and ego (Saraswati). Kartikeya, “God of War,” carries a bow, arrow, and spear to defend the other Hindu Gods. The monkey God, Hanuman, possesses immortality, youthfulness, and everlasting health (see Figure X). Due to his youthfulness, he is the most brisk of all the Hindu Gods. He is also a God of war (Patil 130-131).

Hinduism is flexible when it comes to choosing which form or forms of God to worship. “The Hindu religion brings us the gift of tolerance that allows for different stages of worship, different and personal expressions of devotion and even different Gods to guide our life on this earth” (God and the Gods). This would make sense since

Hinduism prides itself on being not only tolerant of other religions, but also an integration of the good in many religions (Nikhilananda 24-25). Although the Higher Being in Hinduism takes many forms, these Gods and Goddesses are “pure beings made of pure consciousness and light; they are neither male nor female” (God and the Gods). Some of the Hindus that I interviewed agreed with this interpretation of God. When asked what kind of relationship she has with the God in her religion, Jui replied, “To me, my God doesn’t have sex, and I don’t have a picture I identify, saying, “this is my God.” But he/she is more of an entity, a higher being who I go to for comfort and strength and whenever I want to thank them for looking after me and my family.” Jui went on to say that her definition of God is personal, although this may not be in agreement with other Hindus’ beliefs. Ashis responded similarly, saying, “From the standpoint of Hinduism, I would say they worship different Gods. That’s true. But, personally, I believe in one God. So, it’s like I kind of believe and have made up one God for myself, and I believe in him.” Kamal also agreed with this, saying, “The relationship is a close one, but it does not occupy a lot of time. He is always present in the subconscious state of the mind as I am very busy with the daily demand of my life.”

Since Christianity is the only religion I have to compare with Hinduism, I wanted to know if the Hindu God or Gods are fallible like human beings or perfect like the God of Christianity. Naturally, if a person prays to God, he or she might expect God to be in the position of power to answer these prayers. So it would seem important that God be all knowing and all-powerful. When asked about the fallibility of the Hindu God or Gods, Jui replied,

For me, because my God doesn't have a human form. I don't believe that my God's fallible. I don't think my God is fallible, but the Hindu Gods are. In all the stories I've ever heard of them, a lot of them are warrior Gods and they have killed demons or the bad whoever. And I think taking a life is some sort of sin. I do think they have done that, but since they are warrior Gods, I'm not sure how that's defined. They have greed, at least in the stories that I've read. They have greed, they have anger, and they're pretty much human, but my God isn't.

Ashis agreed that his God is also perfect and all knowing.

### **Prayer, Forgiveness, and Life after Death**

The Karma-kanda section of the Vedas describes the rituals of sacrifice and worship to the Gods (Nikhilananda 22). Hinduism states that there is a three-fold debt to repay, which is repaid by prayer and worship to the Gods, regular study of the scriptures, and the bearing of children to carry on the family line (Nikhilananda 69). Thus, Hindus believe they can repay their sins through prayer and sacrifice. Christianity preaches the opposite. Christians ideally pray to thank God for good, to ask God for forgiveness of sins, and to ask God for help when they are in need. A main idea in certain sects of Christianity is that we, as human beings, do not possess the power to atone for our own sins. We need to ask God to forgive our sins for us. I wanted to know how a Hindu views prayer and worship of the Gods. Also, I wanted to know if Hindus believe they have this power to erase their sins. All three of the interviewees believe in forgiveness, but they also believe that any result of prayer comes from within themselves and not from

a God. When asked if he prayed and witnessed results from these prayers, Ashis replied, “Yes, but not in the conventional way. I don’t know conventional prayers. I don’t pray in front of a picture of God or some idol. To tell you frankly, I believe that it is you who do what you get. So it is your results that you get back. It’s not that God does anything.” Jui replied to the same question similarly: For me, if I’ve asked for things or I’ve wanted strength, but because I believe that part of this God or entity is in me, it’s finally up to me to do whatever I have to do.” She went on to say that although her destiny is in her own hands, it is nice to know that there is someone, namely God, to go to for comfort. Kamal agreed: “The Law of Karma states one’s past determines the present and the present determines what the future will be. So it is clear if you commit any wrongful behavior it is only you who will suffer for your wrongful answers.” According to Kamal, forgiveness is attained through “sacrifice and penance.” He adds, “Again, the law of Karma dictates that a wrongful action must be counteracted by a good action.”

People not only pray for their lives on earth, but also for their lives after death. In Christianity, we ask for forgiveness of sins in the hope of securing a blissful life after death. According to Hinduism, a human being has five bodies: the physical body, the pranic body, the astral body, the mental/intellectual body, and the body of the soul. The body of the soul “evolves from birth to birth.” It does not die when the physical body dies. “Once physical births have ceased, this soul body still continues to evolve in subtle realms of existence.” Eventually the soul is said to join with Brahman (God and the Gods). Man’s goal in life or in future lives is to realize the soul is immortal and one with Brahman (Nikhilananda 49). Joining with Brahman is the closest description to heaven or bliss in Hinduism. I asked Jui if she believes in this kind of heaven, and she replied,

I don't think so, and according to Hinduism, it's not that you become a God, but you become a part of him. Because you are apparently created by him, you go and join him, but you don't become him. I'm not sure if I believe in that, that I would go up and join the higher power. I don't know if I believe in rebirth, but I know that life is a full circle. So if I was to say I believe I came from God, obviously that would mean that I'd come back and join him again ... or her. In a way, I do believe in that, it's just a different way of believing it.

Kamal explained heaven as a blissful life achieved on earth: "In religion there is only faith, which leads to Universal Truth. I believe there was life before this life and that there will be another blissful life after this depending on how I lead this life."

Ashis felt unsure about the issue of heaven:

I shouldn't say an emphatic no. It's kind of hazy for me. As a science student, I don't believe there is anything after life, because the whole procreation was basically chemical. After you're dead, again, it's a chemical reaction. You vanish. What I believe is you make heaven within your lifetime. Actually, there's one train of thought in Hinduism that believes in that. You actually make your life heaven or hell. It's not something you do after death.

Once again, there are as many descriptions of heaven and life after death as there are Hindus.



## **Spiritual Exercise**

Spiritual exercise comes in many forms in the Hindu religion. “In Hinduism the general name for spiritual disciplines is yoga, which means, literally, union of the individual self with the supreme self, and also the method of this union” (Nikhilananda 96). The four basic types of yoga are karma-yoga, bhakti-yoga, jnana-yoga, and raja-yoga (Nikhilananda 94, 105, 119, 130). Each type of yoga targets a different kind of spiritual discipline. Although the word “yoga” conjures up thoughts of meditation, yoga can also simply mean good works.

Karma-yoga is the action of good works. A person performs karma-yoga when he or she does a good deed without the expectation of a reward for his or her good works. The desire of worldly possessions, which are not limited to material goods, goes against the teachings and beliefs of Hinduism. Therefore, expecting a reward for ones good works is in conflict with the beliefs of a Hindu (Hopkins 91-92). Karma not only pertains to physical action, or action done by the body, but also to action done by the mind (Fowler 11). Ashis described the kind of spiritual discipline he practices: “I have my own set of standards for myself. I try to be truthful. I try to be helpful. I try not to cheat. I try to basically be a good human.” Most people practice karma-yoga without knowing that this is a type of spiritual discipline. It does not take much time or effort to exercise this type of spiritual development.

One source describes bhakti-yoga as the discipline of devotion. Devotion to the God, Krishna, is said to be the highest form of yoga (Hopkins 93). Another source defines bhakti-yoga to be the yoga of divine love. There are three types of love: material, human, and spiritual. The latter type is what unites humankind with God (Nikhilananda

105). “The discipline of bhakti is the easiest and most natural of all spiritual disciplines, because it does not demand the suppression of normal impulses; it only tells the devotee to turn them to God” (Nikhilananda 109).

Jnana means the way to knowledge (Fowler 112). The practice of jnana-yoga is the discipline that leads to the knowledge of Brahman. There are four rules one must follow while practicing jnana-yoga (Nikhilananda 121-122):

1. “Discrimination between the real and the unreal.”
2. Renunciation. One must not be attached to anything in the physical world including not only material objects, but also earthly feelings and desires.
3. A person must possess the six virtues: “control of the body and the senses; control of the mind; prevention of the sense-organs, once they are controlled, from drifting back to their respective objects; forbearance; complete concentration; and faith.”
4. The true will to be free from the constraints of worldly feelings and desires.

Once a person achieves these four virtues, his or her soul will be free. When a person sets his or her soul free, he or she can dedicate his or her to the prosperity of others (Nikhilananda 129).

The last type of yoga is raja-yoga, which preaches control of the mind. Another type of yoga that is closely related to raga-yoga is hatha-yoga. Hatha-yoga is mainly the practice of different postures and the control of breathing. It is said to lead the way to raga-yoga (Nikhilananda 130, 142). Jui practices this type of yoga, and she described it as a combination of the spiritual and physical:

What really got me involved in it was that I could actually concentrate all my energy in doing the one yoga position really well. It was as if I was

bringing together my mind and my body and my soul. I'm not very good at concentrating, but, after doing this, I could concentrate better. I could organize my mind better. In the simple exercise of breathing, I could totally relax and focus my energies on something. And, for me, that was a big thing, because my mind wanders a lot. But with yoga I felt this immense calming, and it put things in perspective. My guru was getting us to sit and breathe, and he was actually trying to tell us that you would be able to get in touch with yourself, you would also somehow get in touch with the higher power.

The objective of this type of yoga is again to resist the forces of the physical world and become one with the higher power.

In Christianity, ideally we practice good works and renunciation of worldly desires even though it is not called yoga. As Christians, we believe and practice many of the same spiritual disciplines. For instance, Christianity and Hinduism agree that a person should not do good works expecting something in return. When anticipating a reward, one is not genuinely working for the good of others.

Yoga is only one practice in the complex religion of Hinduism. People worship and express their spirituality in many different ways. Some people go to church or to a temple to pray. Some people do good works. Others meditate or study the scriptures. Spiritual discipline comes in a plethora of distinct forms.

## **Hinduism in Practice**

Validity of spiritual truth in Hinduism depends on three factors: scriptures, reason, and personal experience (Nikhilananda 21-22). This obviously means that, as a Hindu, one must not take spiritual truth on faith. Kamal and Jui both addressed the question, "Where did Hinduism fall short for you?" Kamal said, "I do not think any religion can fall short on anyone. Only people fall short on their religion." Jui disagreed. She said that Hinduism fell short for her when she witnessed a close family member not practicing what she preached: "That's what I saw in my grandmother. She used to pray four hours a day, but she was mean and nasty to people around her. For me, that was a contradiction, because if you believe so strongly in God, and you read about him, and you recited things that he had preached, then how could you be mean to people around you?"

Jui and Ashis agreed that the most important part of spirituality and religion is to be a good person. As Ashis said earlier, he tries to be a good person, and that is his religion. Jui said, "My parents said it was more important to be a good person rather than a person who would pray every day and then actually not treat people around them very well."

## **Conclusion**

I had hoped to achieve a greater understanding of Hinduism through research, and I did. Part of researching Hinduism through printed and electronic resources taught me how this religion is ideally supposed to be -- the practices and beliefs of Hinduism in its universally accepted form. Such an understanding provided a groundwork by which to compare and understand the opinions of those I interviewed. It is important to

understand the official beliefs and practices of Hinduism, not only to understand this religion, but also to be able to compare it to the opinions of those interviewed.

Most of India's holidays are religious holidays, which represent continuing customs from ancient India rather than modern celebrations. This reflects the extent to which religion and tradition are imbedded in Indian culture. The ancient traditions and customs come from stories that revolve around the battles fought by the Hindu Gods. In Hinduism, Gods serve more as protectors from demons, whereas, in Christianity, God is both a savior and a protector. Thus, the entire meaning and representation of God or Gods in Hinduism is different from that of Christianity. In turn, the concept of prayer, worship, forgiveness, and rituals take on a different purpose.

My original intent when I interviewed was to obtain a personal and diverse view of Hinduism from those who live it. It is apparent from the varied perspectives of each participant that he or she personalizes Hinduism. Although three interviewees are a small sample size, I discovered that they indeed have diverse perspective. The three participants interpreted Hinduism in a way that reflected their upbringing. Kamal, who grew up in a very religious family, tends to know and believe universally accepted truths in Hinduism. Ashis brings in a scientific perspective into his interpretation, because his background is in computer science. Because Jui practices raja-yoga, which encourages personalizing one's bond with God, her view of Hinduism tends to be more how she believes it should be. What is more interesting is the fact that all three of the Hindus I interviewed not only disagreed with some of the universally accepted practices and beliefs of Hinduism, but also agreed with each other in their disagreement. Although all

three of my interviewees are Hindu, they do not always hold the same beliefs. Everyone interprets his or her religion in a different way, and Hinduism is not an exception.

In some respects, Jui, Ashis, and Kamal agreed with each other. For instance, they all believe that being a good person is the most important part of religion. They all believe that forgiveness for the sins they have committed comes from good works. Although all three interviewees believe in a higher power, the consensus was that answers to their prayers come from within them. Some of their opinions agree with what is universally accepted in Hinduism, and some of their opinions reflect what they believe to be morally right.

Jui, Ashis, and Kamal did not always share the same opinion. Ashis responded to one question by saying that he is a scientific person, therefore can not believe purely on faith certain accepted truths in Hinduism. In other words, he needs proof to believe something is true. Kamal, however, said during his interview: "In religion there is only faith." This statement implies that he takes his religion on faith whether or not he fully understands the universal truth. For Jui, validity of spiritual truth in Hinduism depends on what she believes is morally right.

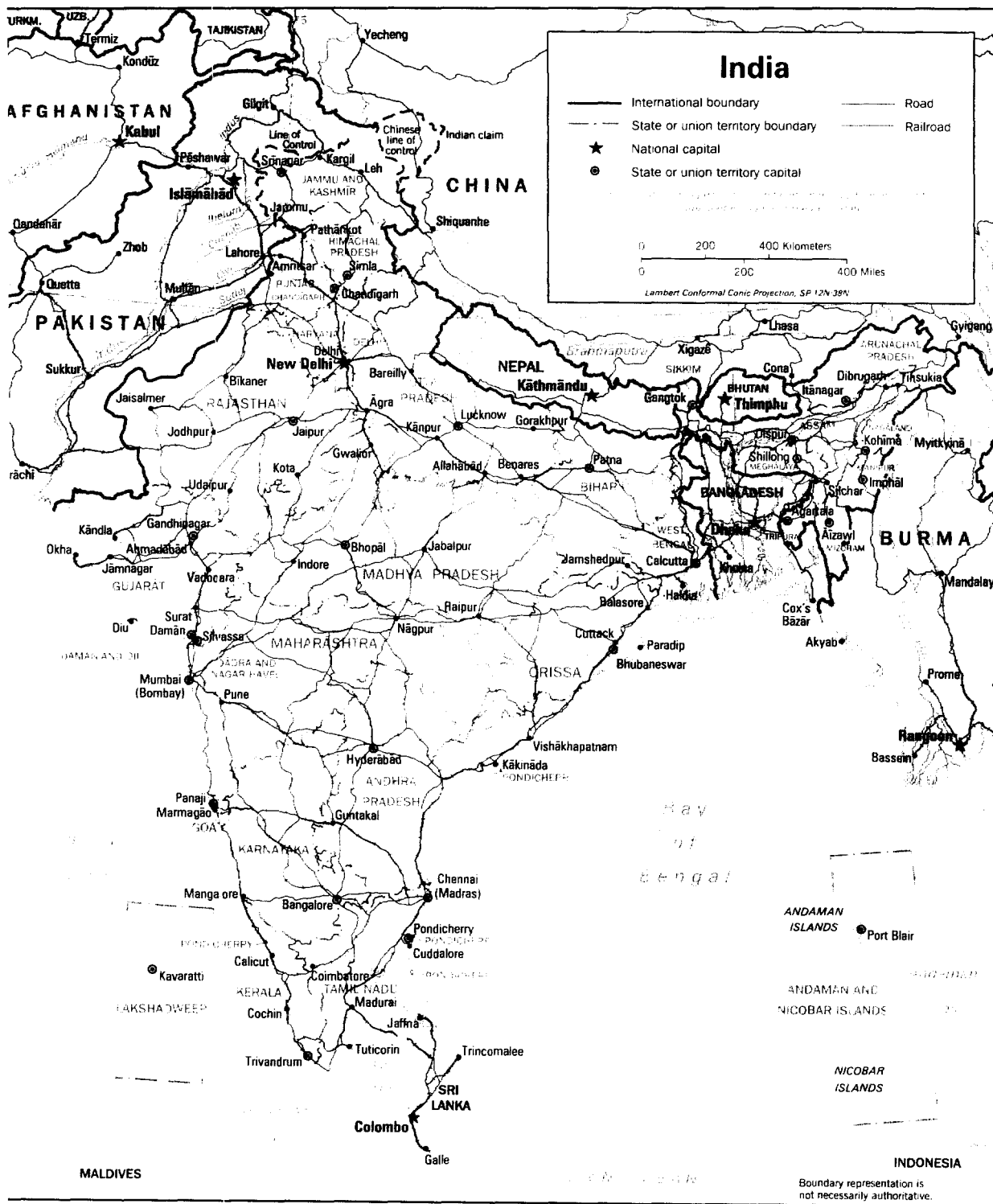
Conducting these interviews and researching Hinduism has taught me that Hinduism is not so drastically different from Christianity as I originally thought. I can now appreciate the similarities as well as differences between these two religions, and I have also realized that people from other religions have similar life goals as Christians. For instance, Christians and Hindus both ideally strive to be better people, become one with God, and serve others. In short, discovering the meaning of Hinduism on a personal level has made me more open-minded to the beliefs of people of other religions as well as

other cultures. I hope I have represented Hinduism and the opinions of those who practice this religion in a way that cultivates the understanding and open-mindedness of Hinduism for the reader.

## Appendix



# India Map (India)



**Figure II (Brahma)**



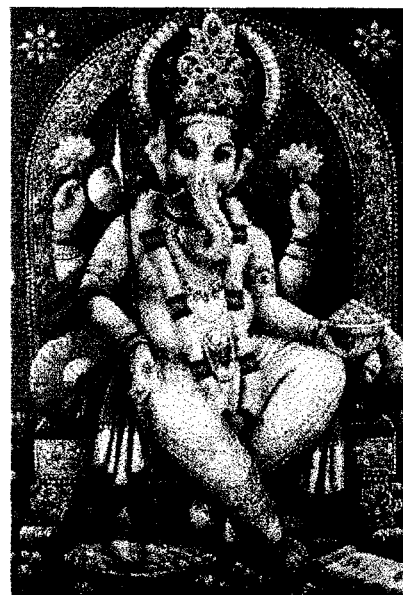
**Figure III (Vishnu)**



**Figure IV (Shiva)**



**Figure V (Ganesh)**



**Figure VI (Rama)**



**Figure VII (Krishna)**



**Figure VIII (Lakshmi)**



**Figure IX (Saraswati)**



**Figure X (Hanuman)**



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